



Mary Lou Bryant-Reid poses for a portrait outside of her home March 4 in Louisville. CLARE GRANT/COURIER JOURNAL

THE BEGINNINGS OF TEEN STAR

Teacher helped shed body taboos

Bryant-Reid: 'We still didn't talk about sex in 1981, but I knew these kids wanted to know about their bodies'



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Louisville educator Mary Lou Ruhl Bryant-Reid didn't realize it when she authored the curriculum, but she helped set the stage for how women learn about their bodies and fertility in more than three dozen countries.

Bryant-Reid, 77, grew up in an era when discussing reproductive health was taboo. Through her involvement with the international organization Teen Star, which runs holistic programs that center on relationships, emotions and fertility awareness, she's worked for more than four decades to shed the taboo nature of discussing the science behind how the female body works.

More than four decades ago, Dr. Hanna Klaus, an OB/GYN and Medical Mission Sister, founded the organization in the 1980s and asked Bryant-Reid to write a curriculum and pilot a seven-month program in Louisville for 15 girls who wanted to learn more about their bodies.

The turnout was unexpected. Fifty-two sophomores at Assumption High School wanted to participate in the afterschool program.

Bryant-Reid began the first session in the 1980s with two daring questions: Do you want to talk "women talk?" And what do you want to know?

"We still didn't talk about sex in 1981, but I knew these kids wanted to know about their bodies," Bryant-Reid told the Courier Journal.

With the help of Klaus, Bryant-Reid came back to

them with scientific answers about the differences between men and women, hormones, emotions, and more. The goal was to teach young women about their reproductive systems and how it impacts the brain and emotions. Once the girls understood that, they could make more informed decisions about health care and reproductive health.

But the need went well beyond the girls in that program.

Bryant-Reid was part of a generation that rarely, if ever, talked about anything related to sex and sexuality, she said. She was 31 the first time she took a class from Klaus at St. Anthony Hospital in Louisville that taught her the Billings ovulation method of how her menstrual cycle worked and what clues her body could give her about fertility.

What she learned about her body in those classes amazed her, and she wished she'd been exposed to that information during puberty.

It didn't take Bryant-Reid long to realize those first girls were raised by parents who also needed to be educated on the topic. So she incorporated six sessions for parents into the program, too.

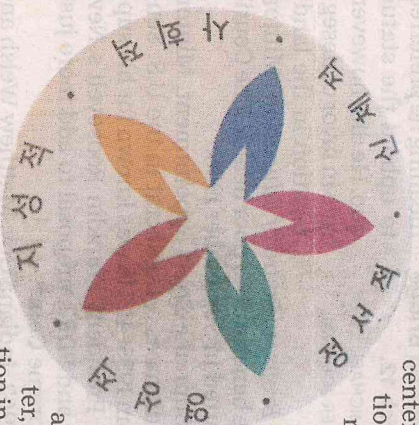
Teen Star is a "self-discovery" program that uses the Socratic method, which focuses on teaching by asking questions. When young people ask and learn what their body is telling them, Bryant-Reid said, they're able to make better and more informed decisions using the information they discovered.

"If you give answers to questions that haven't been asked, it just goes right over their head," Klaus said, in a phone interview, from her home in Pennsylvania. "Mary Lou is a very gifted teacher, but what drives her is that she loves kids and can bring out the best in them, and that's wonderful."

Over the past four decades, the organization has grown to offer a curriculum for teenage boys, middle schoolers, college students, and women postpartum. Bryant-Reid is retired now but still serves on the Teen Star board. Through her work, she's taught about 200 students and hosted teacher workshops in 17 states and 10 countries.

Through that very first curriculum from the 1980s, she's indirectly reached and helped educate thousands of people around the world.

"We're not doing people justice if we don't teach them the truth about their bodies," Bryant-Reid said.



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